



Postcolonial English

English in Post colonial Malaysia

NARRATOR

The position of English in Malaysia with its ethnically diverse population is highly controversial, particularly in education.

NARRATOR

When it was a British colony, education for each group was general conducted in their own indigenous language, Malay, Tamil and a variety of Chinese dialects. English also played an important role, especially in secondary and higher education.

NARRATOR

In preparation for Independence in 1957, a decision was taken to establish Malay, usually referred to as Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Melayu as the national language in order to help unify the three ethnic groups.

SARAN

The natural reaction of countries that attain their independence is to shift, to create an identity for themselves, a national identity and in Malaysia's case, post Independence there was also this need to move away from the association with the colonial power and therefore English and therefore they instituted Bahasa Melayu as the national language.

NARRATOR

Following Independence, Malay was gradually introduced as the medium of instruction in many primary schools and in secondary schools it often replaced English.

GANAKUMARAN

It needed time before the country could actually shape its own identity within the education system and the other thing that happened in the early periods, post Independence, was that we had multiple education structures in operation in the country. Some of the vernacular schools for instance, the Chinese and the Tamil schools largely used material and curriculum designs which originated from China or India.

NARRATOR

In the 1960s tension grew between the Chinese and Malay communities, culminating in the race riots of 1969 in which several hundred people were killed.

GANAKUMARAN

That was a landmark event that began to shape subsequent policies in the use of English. By 1975, 76 the schools had completely shifted from English language as the medium of instruction to Malay as the medium instruction. So the whole period of the late seventies and eighties up to the nineties, while English still remained as a single subject in the school curriculum, Malay was the main language of communication.

SARAN

They had to submerge English. So English which used to be the medium of instruction became just a second language in the school system which was compulsory to take but not compulsory to pass so immediately the seriousness with which the language is regarded is subdued and I think therein lies the biggest mistake that the government made at that point in time.

NARRATOR

Some parts of the Chinese community, which makes up twenty five per cent of the population have strongly resisted the government's attempts to make Malay the medium of instruction in all schools.

NARRATOR

Chinese associations have set up their own schools alongside the state system.

LYE

We emphasise the three languages, English as an international language, Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and Chinese as the mother tongue. I think generally the Chinese community accept English and they think that English is very important for them but for Bahasa Malaysia because maybe we are now lesser in using the language so that is why they do not think that it is as important as English. They learn these two languages, they will think English is very important, Chinese and the least important is Bahasa Malaysia.

NARRATOR

Another impact of the race riots was for the government to turn its attention to the universities which were still teaching in English.

SARAN

Universities were slow on the uptake and that caused a lot of frustration amongst the dominant ethnic group. So post sixty nine, this implementation and institution of Bahasa as the language of knowledge in universities was implemented very much more strongly and post sixty nine in 1970, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was also set up and developed as the first university that used Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction, as the language of instruction.

NARRATOR

Initially, implementing the new higher education policy and switching from English to Malay proved complicated.

SUBRAMARIAM

So all the public universities, that's government funded universities in Malaysia, the subjects was taught in Malay alright and that created a big problem because we, as the economy of scaling as an economist I will tell you that it's very difficult to produce books in sufficient economic quantity in a language which is not large, widely used you know. So we had difficulty in text books in Malay so we had to use English text books while teaching in Malay and they posed problems for the students and I think quality did suffer because of that you know. And because students inability to read English, their general ability to read widely suffered a lot.

NARRATOR

The founding of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or UKM was part of the drive to raise the status of Bahasa Melayu.

SARAN

UKM was set up to ennoble the national language Bahasa Melayu so it's so easy to be seduced by the English language and to go with the flow. UKM feels very strongly that it needs to provide a space and avenue for a national language because if all of us went down that path of only giving in to English, who would there be in the country then to take care of the national language and ensure that also develops along the same lines. So that's why it's so serious and it's so important for this university.

NARRATOR

In the eighties and nineties, Malaysia enjoyed spectacular economic growth but there was a growing concern that the choice of Malay as the national language might hamper Malaysia's future growth. Its neighbour Singapore was thriving with English as an official national language.

SARAN

If you're talking about attracting FDIs, foreign direct investment into your country and you're wanting to attract multi nationals to come and set up bases in your country you needed to provide them with a workforce that is fluent in an international language and that had to be English. So there were complaints and there were messages being sent around that we're developing a generation that's not fluent and you've got to do something about it.

NARRATOR

As a result of these pressures, the government softened its stand and allowed foreign and private universities to be set up, teaching in English.

SUBRAMARIAM

So now you have a dichotomy in this country. Public universities use Malay and private universities English and over the years what's happening is more affluent families are able to afford to send their kids to private universities or abroad to get English education. The poorer Malaysians have to send their kids to public universities because they are subsidised, the fees are lower so they end up learning in Malay so the gap is growing wider, you know in terms of mobility for children of poorer families, their ability to move up in the social economic ladder is actually being, there's a big barrier now because of this language and it's a sad thing you know.

NARRATOR

The government also changed its schools policy and reintroduced English as a medium of instruction though only for two subjects, maths and science.

TEACHER

When they have high metabolism, they will not gain weight no matter how much they eat. Ya, some people are like that. You eat so much you don't gain weight.

NARRATOR

The new policy was successful in urban schools like this one but did not work in rural areas where many teachers are not fluent in English.

SARAN

There were serious challenges of teaching science and maths in English in the rural areas, especially in situations where the teachers themselves were not competent and were not committed. There were teachers maybe who felt that let's wait, the policy might change so why should we invest so much of effort into trying to do this in English. So if they are not committed and they do it in a language for which they have not much competency and have no aspirations to want to improve, then it's a recipe for disaster.

HUGH

The problem of course was that there were huge numbers of maths and science teachers who didn't have a good level of English and it was extremely demotivating for them. I think the other thing it's been demoting for, for, is for the pupils who don't speak English as a mother tongue which is perhaps eighty per cent of the population or maybe more. Because not only now do they find that they find English difficult but they now had difficulty understanding and doing well in maths and science and were blaming English for their not liking and not understanding maths and science.

NARRATOR

Teaching in English has now become a political football in Malaysia and there is a strong rule lobby opposing English.

CHRIS

Unfortunately because Malaysia is an ex British colony, there is this feeling of elitism attached to English. I've experienced as many teachers have in the playground, you might get a couple of students talking together in English, they will be chastised by their peers 'why are you speaking English, you think you're better than we are'.

CHRIS

The government tries, is trying to change that mentality and trying to ensure that people understand that it is the language of business and commerce, the Internet but still there is this lingering elitist kind of idea, particularly among rural students.

NARRATOR

But the government has now agreed to phase out the teaching of maths and science and English and decided instead to focus on improving the teaching of English.

CHRIS

What the Ministry's doing at the moment is they are compensating for the reversal decision by putting extra resources and extra money into English language teaching and they're already introducing projects to bring in ex patriot teachers, ex patriot teacher trainers to run courses, more courses for local teachers and so on in order to upgrade the quality of English language lessons.

NARRATOR

Whilst the importance of English is now widely acknowledged, it's also clear to many commentators that each ethnic group should be allowed and encouraged to maintain its own language.

SARAN

I see more and more the need for us to really establish our ethnic identity via our mother languages, which for me would have been Punjabi but because it was that period of time in which I grew up, where the focus was on the English language and I was in an English medium school at that point in time, I, I, I, I came from a lost generation. I lost my mother tongue. I'm not literate in the Punjabi language and I speak social Punjabi so now I realise the importance of having that because one can't just survive on just one language.